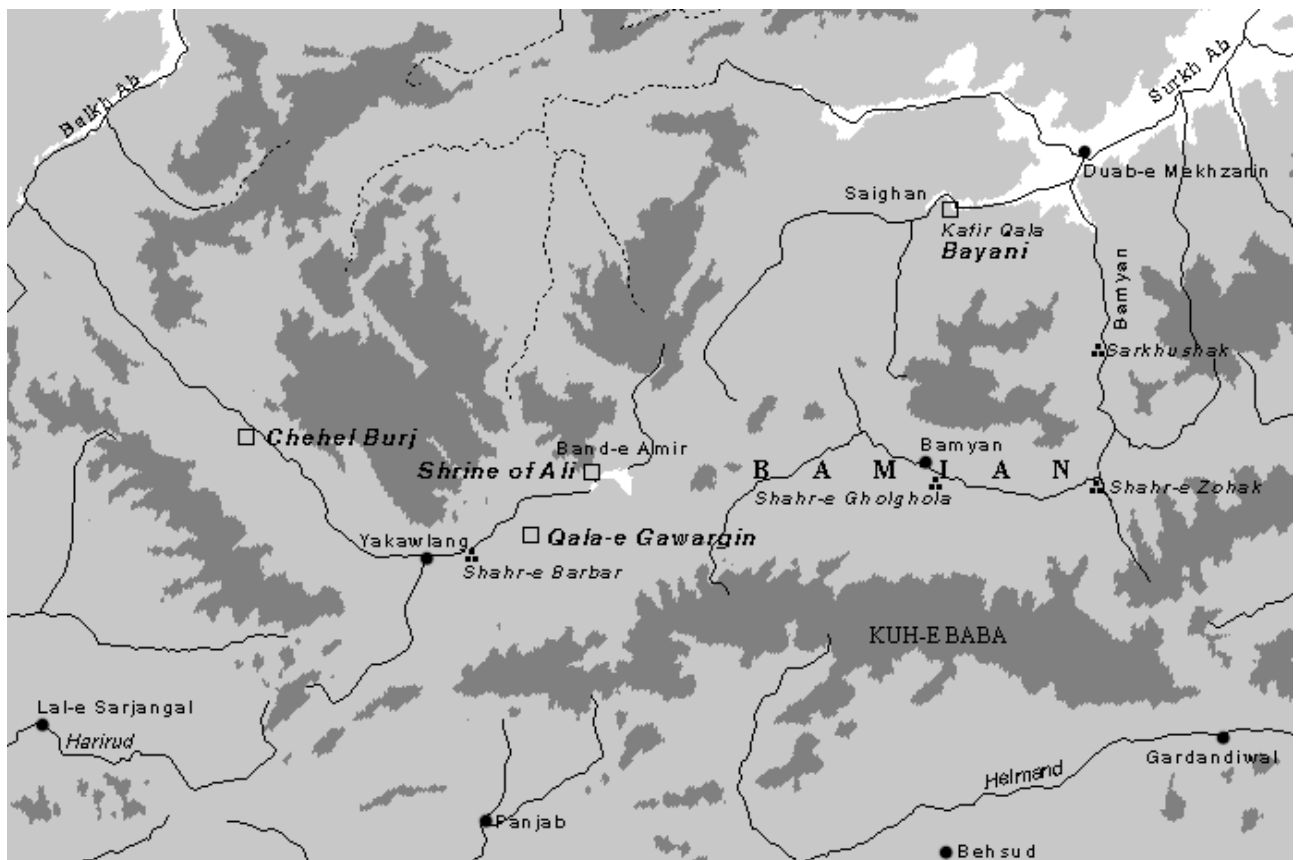


FORTRESSES OF THE HAZARAJAT

REPORT ON SITES VISITED IN SAIGHAN, YAKAWLANG, BAND-E AMIR AND CHAGHCHERAN DISTRICTS

DATES OF VISIT:	12 July	to Kafir Qala-ye Bayani,	Saighan
	0 and 31 August	to Chehel Burj,	Yakawlang
	23 September	to Hazrat-e Ali shrine,	Band-e Amir
	24 September	to Qala-e Gawargin,	Yakawlang
	28 September	to Qala-e Ahangaran,	Chaghcheran

MAP



DESCRIPTION OF THE SITES VISITED

Kafir Qala-ye Bayani, Bamyan ("Heathen's Castle")

Location: 35N12, 67E47, on the Right Bank of the Saighan river, about 2 hours from Duab-e Mekhzarin

Description: On top of a hill, a fortress akin to Shahr-e Zohak or Chehel Burj in its construction, with a central part ("dungeon") at the highest point, and towers connected by walls leading down the slopes in a radial fashion. These were probably once connected to form defensive concentric circles. The construction is of mud-brick with some stone foundations (not "largely stone construction" as Warwick Ball states in the *Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan*, 1982 - hereafter referred to as "the Gazetteer" - Vol. 1 p.54, probably quoting Le Berre of the DAFA who did a survey of the site in 1974-75).

We could reach the foot of the walls of the central part on the north and east sides, but not get beyond them (maybe there's an entrance from the southwest side). The walls are mostly still in very good condition, only on the east side had they crumbled, but the landslide it had created made the attempt to reach this breach very dangerous. Of the towers at least a dozen were still standing on the south, east and northeast sides, with remains of others. There were some mud-brick decorative elements in the walls and towers, as in Chehel Burj.

Beneath the walls of the central section, on the northwest and southeast, we found three remains of what seemed to be Buddhist caves, similar to those at Bamyan (with smooth wall and ceiling surfaces, and niches and benches hewn out of the cave walls). One was completely excavated; two others were partially excavated. The excavations of the caves were quite recent and it is quite probable that Buddhist statues were found here. Le Berre speaks only of "some artificial caves in the vicinity", probably referring to those at the bottom of the hill, so the Buddhist ones we saw seem to have been unknown in 1975. There was a reported find of what seems to have been a Buddhist stone funerary urn - it was described as a big, ancient stone pan ("*dig*") which is what they look like - on the east side of the hill, at the bottom of the landslide.

The inhabitants of the nearby village (Bayani) believe the mountain is hollow and that inside there is a labyrinth of large caves, underground lakes and a passage leading to Bamyan, 50-60 km. further south. Nobody knew where the entrance was supposed to be. Finally there is a small rudimentary shrine at the foot of the hill, on its eastern side too, but a bit to the south of where the main entrance of the fortress is (and the landslide). The villagers refused to talk about any possible finds or treasure-hunting after one of them had been told off for mentioning the stone urn, and it seems they had something quite important to hide. They tried to discourage us of climbing up to the site.

Chehel Burj, Bamyan ("Forty Towers")

Location: 34N55, 66E37; on the left side of the Band-e Amir river, two hours drive from Yakawlang (road quite difficult).

Description: Chehel Burj, perched upon a high hilltop like most other Turki-Shahi (or Ghori?) fortresses of the area, lies in a bend of the Band-e Amir/Balkh Ab river. To the northwest, some 50 meter above the fertile green riverbed which widens out from this point, there's a large flat plateau, a few hundred meters wide and about a kilometer long. This would be an ideal, strategic location for a town, defended by the fortress. On this plateau one sees remains of a huge mud-brick enclosure which might have marked the site of the town, but it is difficult to determine its age.

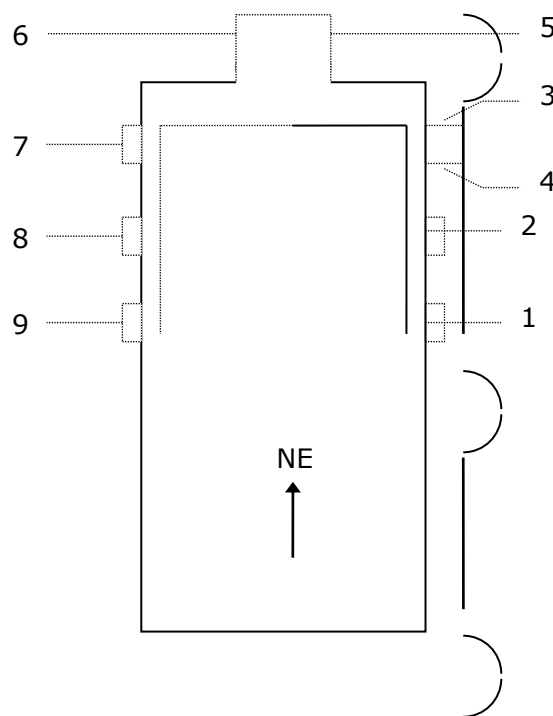
The site, first described by Maitland of the Afghan Boundary Commission in 1885, was surveyed only by Brett ea. of Bristol University in 1970. He counted "over 300 large towers" (*The Gazetteer*, Vol. I p. 71) : that seems a bit exaggerated, but there are certainly more than the forty given by the site's name. The "three lines of walls completely surrounding a hill" must also be imagined, for only parts of the highest one remain; moreover, there are no traces of walls or towers of second and third defensive lines on the back side of the fortress (south and

west). Many of the towers are still in good shape and retain their distinctive decorative elements, notably the curious pattern of three inverted triangles above the loopholes in the towers that Warwick Ball mentions. That the higher walls remain longer than the lower ones is certainly due to the effect of erosion.

Most of the central part of the site is under a thick layer of earth (mud-brick rubble), and one sees only the higher parts of the walls, which show no traces of plaster or wood. One area, a kind of lower courtyard on the eastern side of the site (but belonging to the central corps) had however been partially excavated in recent years by treasure hunters. They had dug a narrow trench along the northern half of the eastern wall of this courtyard, which continued on its north side and then, underground (the rubble being too high on this side), along the northern half of the western wall. They had not continued because, our local guide Khanali told us, they had found nothing valuable enough. Khanali lives in the settlement at the foot of Chehel Burj and is very familiar with the site, to which he showed an unexpected cultural sensitivity (lamenting the desecration by treasure hunters).

What the treasure hunters had unearthed, though, were frescoes in the blind arches of the courtyard, and on the sides of two archways leading to a hole in the wall on the eastern side and to a tower on the northern side

EASTERN COURTYARD AT THE TOP OF CHEHEL BURJ



Description of the frescoes

- Fresco #1 was quite unintelligible, one could only distinguish some decorative patterns which reminded one of the Sassanian style found also at Bamyān, and what seems to be the elbow and chest of a figure (photo BAM0008/37)
- Fresco #2, of which the central part was hewn out and the rest quite damaged, seemed to represent a galloping horseman with a turban flying behind him (photo BAM0008/38)
- Frescoes #3 and #4, on both sides of a archway leading to a precipice, showed a couple of dancing women and the lower part of a much larger figure in a robe, walking, seen from behind-left. We excavated much of the fresco #3 ourselves, to find the bottom of the picture (it was in quite good condition). Here also there were many of the circular

decorative patterns typical of the late Sassanians in ochre-red paint (photos BAM0008/39 and BAM0008/40)

- Fresco #5 was the largest one. It was apparently a portrait of King Zohak and an equal-sized woman holding his hand, with what seemed to be an elephant behind them. (photo BAM0008/41).
- Fresco #6, opposite that of King Zohak, was too destroyed to make any sense of it.
- Frescoes #7, 8 and 9 were scarcely visible, most of them still being half underground, and unlit (one can only access them by crawling through an underground gallery dug by the treasure hunters). I took a photograph through the macro-lens of a detail of fresco #8 which showed quite nice bright colors, seemingly of the same kind used at Bamyan (photo BAM0008/42)

Comments

The mere presence of frescoes is quite surprising. I do not know of any other frescoes of this period in Afghanistan, the subject matter of these being obviously non-religious (non-Buddhist). In any case, they would change the date given for Chehel Burj in *The Gazetteer* (Ghorid, 12th-13th century) to the earlier period of the Turkish Khanates, 8th-9th century) - clearly somewhere between the Buddhist and the Islamic periods.

#2: The galloping horseman portrayed here reminds one of the frescoes found at Balalyk Tepe (Uzbekistan), of which the following is said in "The Image of the Buddha" (Snellgrove, ed.; UNESCO, 1978; p. 195) :

"...we can see the essential cultural unity in this group of sculptures and paintings found in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan over a period that probably extends from the end of the sixth to the eighth century AD. Balalyk Tepe is one of the most interesting of these centers from a social-historical standpoint, for it is an example of a fortress-farm, the residence of a rural lord, that is to say, a member of the feudal class that - as we can also see from the excavations at Piandzhikent - in the artistic expression of their own aristocratic outlook showed a preference for themes such as banquets and battles, which we would call 'chivalric'..."

These "chivalric themes" seem to be found also in the frescoes discovered at Chehel Burj (including fresco #3, and maybe fresco #1). This would extend the area of Turkish presence to the southwest, as only places in Bamyan and the North of Afghanistan were regarded as belonging to the Turkish Khanates - while the Turki-Shahis ruled in the Kabul area, Ghazni and Kandahar. No site in Yakawlang valley was previously regarded as belonging to the Turkish period (*The Gazetteer*, Vol. II, pp. 486-487).

#3 and 4: The dancing figures, scantily dressed in tight pants and a veil around their breasts, make it quite unlikely that these frescoes were made in the Islamic period. One may even wonder whether the fort was subsequently occupied by the Ghorids, who would have probably destroyed these frescoes. It seems more likely that the fort was destroyed in the Islamic conquest (10th century). The flowing lines of these paintings and their composition (a person seen walking from three-quarters behind) attest to a high artistic level not unlike that of Bamyan (with many shared stylistic elements, for example the Sassanian circular motifs). They are not unlike the frescoes above the big Buddha in Bamyan - compare with the women musicians - but less technically perfect. The figures are outlined in charcoal black and there is no trace of colors in the drawn forms; decorative motives are mostly in ochre-red. However, as fresco #8 shows, some of the paintings did have more elaborate coloring (dark blue, red and gold)

#5: I had heard about this portrait from one of the guides we picked up in Yakawlang, who had told us about a painting of King and Queen Zohak being uncovered and disfigured in the vicinity of Chehel Burj. The central parts of the portrait were indeed missing (the woman's face, the man's face, the hands, the area around the man's head). The gaps above his shoulders lent credence to the fact it was King Zohak, because this is where the snakes must have been that, legend has it, had emerged from his shoulders when Hazrat Ali damned him. Moreover he is, like the Imam Ali himself, a very popular legendary figure in all the Hazarajat. Besides the giant "Shahr-e Zohak" (or Red Fortress) in Bamyan valley, there are at least two more places associated with his legend towards the West, in Ghor province. Hazrat Ali and Zohak symbolize the struggle between Good and Evil in these parts of Afghanistan. There is however no certainty that King Zohak really existed; besides, in the original legend of Ali there

is no mention of Zohak's presence in Afghanistan (the narrative takes place in Iran/Iraq).

Qala-e Gawergin, Bamyan (Gawergin fortress)

Location: 34N45; 67^E07; in the fertile Firuzbihar valley, about 20 minutes south of the road from Bamyan to Yakawlang.

Description: Not much remains of this curious fortress, straddling a ridge with steep cliffs on both sides; all buildings are on a NW-SE line. There probably used to be a footpath from one end of the fortress to the other, linking the various defensive buildings, and there might have been terraces in stone to support some buildings; because as it is now, it is very difficult to get from one end to the other, and it seems quite impossible that any major building could have been built on this steep irregular terrain.

The remains are in mud-brick and of similar construction to Chehel Burj or Saighan; they probably date from the same, Turkish period. They are mostly towers, and there is one slightly bigger building (multistoried) with some blind arches. No traces of decorative elements, except the usual mud-brick patterns. On the very top of a rocky ridge a wall still stands, overlooking a cliff on the Firuzbihar side, and a steep rocky slope on the Southeast side; maybe a building or sentinel path was built on this steep slope using stone terracing. What other purpose could this wall have served?

Even more mysterious is a staircase hewn in the rock, which descends to the center of the mountain. One first lets oneself down a 6-meter high shaft, and then one can descend 99 high steps. No traces of decoration remain on the walls or ceiling. The end has caved in. Warwick Ball, probably quoting Talbot and Maitland from the Afghan Boundary Commission who surveyed the site in 1885 - since then there has been no mention of this fortress - says the staircase descends below ground level. I did not measure it, but assuming each step was 50 cm high, the point I reached cannot have been much below ground level (rather above). Either the staircase caved in since their visit, or the original surveyors listened to the local legend, that has the underground passage go far away towards Bamyan.

I reckoned that the staircase probably used to go to ground level, offering easy access to the people wanting to reach and leave the fortress, because the climb up the cliff is very difficult. It may also have led to a well. It is possible, also, that it led to another fortification; many are to be spotted on the east side, on the far side of a narrow small valley. In this valley, incidentally, they specialize in making millstones, which supply all the mills in the area.

Another strange feature of this site was that on the Firuzbihar side, a cliff of at least 20-meter high was entirely covered in straw-plaster, as my local guides pointed out. I expressed disbelief, saying that it must be some kind of mud deposited there by the wind, but they showed me there were indeed some residual elements of straw (straw decomposes in the mud-plaster). Why would a cliff be plastered over? The only reason one can think of is that there must have been a huge painting or fresco adorning the side of this fortress.

Warwick Ball does not give a date to this fortress; I venture it must be from the 9th-10th century like the other fortresses in the area.

Ja-e Namaz-e Hazrat Ali, Bamyan (the prayer place of Imam Ali)

Location: 34N50, 67^E12; on the shore of the Band-e Haibat (the Awe-imposing or Majestic Lake) in the series of lakes of Band-e Amir

Description: In a bend of the Band-e Haibat, under a rocky outcrop, stands this shrine erected in the early 20th century. At its foot are some rooms for pilgrims, and ruins of other buildings. Presently these rooms are exploited by Hajji Ismail, who rents them to visitors. They are the only facilities left over from the time there were several hotels in Band-e Amir.

The building itself, in mud-brick, has little historical value; it has a bit of architectural value, being a two-storied building - which is rare in this region - with one main domed chamber in which a pile of stones laid in the form of a grave mark the shrine, a small mosque with mihrab to its west, and a similar room to its east. Above both small rooms is a second storey, each with two domes (but of the four only one remains, the others have crumbled). A passage along the back (cliff) wall leads from one side to the other, and each side has a staircase winding

down to the front of the shrine. From all sides there are stunning views over the lake and the mountains surrounding it.

The shrine itself stands on a raised terrace, with a staircase leading down on either side. Under it are some of the pilgrims' rooms of poor (but stone) construction.

The main interesting decorative elements are the stucco-work in the main dome chamber, some loose-lying calligraphic works in schist, and the entrance to the shrine, with a wooden door, gates, and an inscription above the door.

Legend has it that, between his miraculous works (which include the creation of these lakes), Ali, the son-in law of the prophet, rested and prayed here. Many people from the surrounding areas visit this shrine, and some of them stay overnight. It is also on the route from the Hazarajat to Mazar-i Sharif *via* Darra-ye Suf. Many Hazaras (used to) live in Mazar-i Sharif, so this is quite a frequented way (and since recently demined, and thus open to traffic again).

The shrine is in need of urgent repair, and parts of the roof are about to collapse.

Qala-e Ahangaran, Ghor (The Blacksmith's Castle)

Location: 34N28; 65E04; in the village of Ahangaran, next to the main road from Chaghcheran to Herat.

Description: very few remains of a fortified building on a rocky outcrop. The site is difficult to visit because farm-buildings have recently been built on top of it. One can only see some remains of walls and towers along the sides of the outcrop. Most baked bricks have been reused for modern buildings; one I picked up definitely had the dimensions of a Timurid brick, although The Gazetteer gives the site as being Sassanian and Ghorid (Vol. I p.29).

The people of the village called our attention to a part of the ancient walls that did not absorb water; they seemed to have a high saltpeter content, being greasy and tasting a bit salty. Since this mineral (potassium nitrate) is not known to form naturally in this area (it does in places in Iran and India), this castle might have been used as a store for saltpeter (which constitutes 75% of the gunpowder mix) from a nearby "saltpeter plantation", or from caves where saltpeter does form naturally. This vocation would be in keeping with the blacksmiths that gave the place its name.

According to local lore, this castle belonged to the blacksmith that killed King Zohak. King Zohak needed to feed a human brain every day to each of the snakes that had grown out of his shoulders, and this human sacrifice bled the country of all its young people. One day it was the turn of a blacksmith's daughter. He fooled King Zohak however, and before his daughter could be sacrificed he smashed the king's head with his hammer (the serpents quickly gobbled up the brain of their master). The thankful people then made him their king, and this was supposed to be his castle. It could however never have been a big castle.

On the southwest corner of the site stand the remains of one of the towers. The inhabitants showed me a hole they had made in it (and then covered up); behind it, they maintained, was a secret passageway. I looked inside the hole, where I saw a bit of ancient masonry, but nothing else.

When asked whether they had found anything valuable on the site, they told us that they had found nothing else than pottery sherds and bits and pieces of tiles. We pressed on them to keep any piece they might find and remember its location, for the future tourist development of their village, which would bring in much more money than selling off the antiquities to traders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I hope this survey has called the attention, precisely, to the lack of surveys in the Hazarajat. Many fortresses there have not received any proper attention from specialists since they were first sighted by the Afghan Boundary Commission in the 1880s, and, according to fairly reliable local sources of information, there are many new sites. Treasure hunters are very active in the area, which is quite sad, because so little is known of the history of this area, and

the available historical evidence is being destroyed. This is quite a different situation from that at Surkh Kotal, Ai Khanoum and Hadda, which had already been (partially) excavated.

Therefore it seems urgent that specialist attention be directed to of the whole area, especially Yakawlang and its side valleys; probably other nearby valleys, towards the North (Kahmard, Darra-ye Suf and Saighan) and Northwest (the whole area drained by the Murghab river) are also subjected to the gradual disappearance of their unknown historical and cultural heritage.

We could entrust a **preliminary survey** of the Yakawlang area to Hajji Safwed, previously Director of the Department of Historical Monuments in Bamyan. The price for such a preliminary survey (including photographs), that could be done in a month or two, should not exceed **500 \$**.

A more **in-depth survey** of the sites indicated by the preliminary survey would be conducted by a team consisting of a SPACH representative, a local guide, a member of the Institute of Archaeology, a driver and one or two trainees. It would last two weeks and cost about **1,000 \$**.

Some restoration work and "**emergency excavations**" could also be carried out at Chehel Burj. There is a specialist in plaster and frescoes conservation present at the Kabul Museum, known as Taher, who would be competent enough to undertake such a job. A specialist of the region, such as Jonathan Lee might be willing to supervise such excavations. A team of two or three people assisted by half a dozen local workers could excavate and salvage the frescoes within two months. Altogether it could be arranged for about **2,000 \$**, not counting the fees for an eventual international specialist.

The **restoration of the shrine of Ali** at Band-e Amir would be a project appreciated by many Afghans. Band-e Amir used to be a main tourist attraction. It does not need specialists to undergo restoration, since the building techniques are the same as those used today. It would probably not cost more than **3,000 \$**. Moreover it would be an excellent project for SPACH trainees to work on, because it is fairly easy.

*October 2000
Robert Kluyver
SPACH representative in Afghanistan*